

Almost every bridge player uses the Stayman convention, where, in response to partner's One No Trump opening bid, a bid of Two Clubs asks if he holds a four-card major suit. Using Stayman means that you cannot play in a contract of Two Clubs once partner opens One No Trump but this loss is regarded as worthwhile because it might allow you to find a better contract in a major suit.

The Stayman convention is designed to allow you to find a 4-4 (or sometimes a 5-4) major suit fit. When using a weak no-trump, some players are taught they need to have at least 11 points before they can use the convention. The reason given for this is that they will be able to bale out in Two No Trumps, where they will hold a combined minimum of 23 points should they fail to locate a 4-4 major suit fit. However, there are many hands containing less than 11 points where it is better to respond Two Clubs than to pass One No Trump. Here are some examples :

A9763
Q1042
753
8

Partner might be able to make One No Trump if he holds some high cards in the minor suits. However, if he holds four cards in either major suit, a contract of Two Hearts or Two Spades is likely to be a better place to play. If partner responds Two Diamonds, denying a four-card major suit, you can bid Two Spades. There is no guarantee that this will be a better contract than One No Trump but it's unlikely to be significantly worse. At least with spades as trumps your small cards in the suit will carry more weight than they will in a no-trump contract.

If we make your hand a lot weaker, it is still better to respond Two Clubs :

J9742
10873
742
5

Again you will be better placed, though not necessarily in a contract that will succeed, if partner is able to respond Two Hearts or Two Spades to your Stayman Two Clubs bid. And again, if he responds two Diamonds, you will bid Two Spades and take your chances there.

The idea of responding with just one high card point might seem a bit risky but that is an illusion. Partner can only make three bids in response to your Stayman bid of Two Clubs : Two Diamonds (you will then bid Two Spades), Two Hearts or Two Spades (you will Pass either of these).

There is another reason why you should bid with a hand as weak as this. Ask yourself : "where are all the high card points ?" You know for certain that the opponents have at least 25 points between them ... and your right-hand opponent has not bid over your partner's opening bid of One No Trump ... so your left-hand opponent might be sitting there with a fistful of points, just waiting to double One No Trump for penalties. A contract of One No Trump, doubled, is sure to fail and it could lead to a four-figure penalty. But if you bid Two Clubs instead of Passing, it might deflect the opponents and allow you to escape, undoubled, into Two Hearts or Two Spades. Whatever happens after your Stayman response of Two Clubs is unlikely to be worse than leaving partner to suffer in One No Trump doubled.

The aim of trying to escape into an undoubled contract introduces the idea of using Stayman as a smokescreen on other very weak hands where there is not even a guarantee of finding a major suit fit :

9754	9754
J1063	J106
1093	10932
62	6

As with the example above, you can be certain that One No Trump is not going to make. It's very likely that your left-hand opponent is about to Double for penalties, and you know that this is going to be very costly. To prevent this, bid Two Clubs with the intention of Passing whatever partner happens to bid next, even if he responds Two Diamonds. You don't expect to make any contract – all you are doing is trying to land in an undoubled contract. This ploy might not work of course but it's surprising how often you can get away with it.

Finally, a hand from Shoreham (board 18, 28th Jan). You end up in Seven No Trumps with these hands :

KQ963
A7
AKQ875
void

A54
K96
62
AQ843

A heart is led which you win in hand with the King. You run off six diamond tricks (very pleased to see them splitting 3-2) and now you have to take the rest in this position with the lead in dummy :

KQ963
A
void
void

A54
9
void
AQ

Neither defender has discarded a spade. There is no problem if the spades are splitting 3-2 but what if they are 4-1 ? Be careful. You should cash the King first and then lead low to the Ace. As it happened, your right-hand opponent held the singleton Jack and discarded when you led over to your Ace. Now you can take the marked finesse against the 10 .. and that's 13 tricks.

Enjoy your bridge.